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## Maher Zain, Technology, and Southeast Asia's Place in Modern Islam

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On a recent fall afternoon in Putrajaya, the administrative capital of Malaysia, hundreds of people came to celebrate the wedding of the son of Dr. Osman Bakar, one of the nation's foremost scholars of Islam. As is often the case with Malay weddings, guests streamed in and out of the large ballroom. There were several dozen large tables, where the guests were served traditional specialties: rice, *rendang tok* (a dry meat dish), chicken curry, various vegetables, watermelon, and rose juice. The proud father, Bakar, greeted guests and wore a purple *baju melayu* (shirt and pants), black *songkok* (cap), and gold *kain sarong* (skirt)—much as Malay men have done for generations at weddings. When the groom and his procession of friends and relatives entered the ballroom to meet the bride and begin the *bersanding* (the enthronement or public display of the bride and groom at the heart of a Malay wedding), they were accompanied by children playing traditional Malay drums (*kompang*) and waving a traditional *bunga manggar* (silver palm blossom tree).

But there was one important aspect of the wedding which would have been unrecognizable to Bakar's forefathers or would not have been included in a similar wedding as recently as two years ago: the music. When the *bersanding* began, Maher Zain's English language romantic song, "For the Rest of My Life" boomed across the ballroom and signaled to guests that the main event of the wedding was beginning. The music of the Lebanese-Swedish music star, taken from his 2009 album, *Thank You Allah*, played for the remainder of the wedding, only pausing for the reading of an Islamic prayer for the new couple.

The place of Zain's music at the wedding reflected the popularity of the Muslim singer in Southeast Asia and suggests how his vision of synthesizing Islam and [modernity](#) resonates with the hundreds of millions of Muslims in the region— the largest in the Muslim world. From southern [Thailand](#) to the outermost [Indonesian](#) islands, Zain's songs are now as ubiquitous an element of the daily environment as afternoon thunderstorms and spicy rice dishes. In both *kampongs* (villages) and cities, Zain's songs are part of any public event— whether on radio playlists, cell phone ringtones, and Facebook postings, or as background music heard in the streets, malls, buses, and trains.

Remarkably, Zain spent virtually no money on advertising in Southeast Asia. Instead, he utilized Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to publicize his work to the region's Muslims. They bought *Thank You Allah* in record numbers and helped to amplify the significance of his music and his message to the peoples of the Middle East and the wider Muslim world during the 2011 Arab Awakening. Ultimately, Zain helps us see the emerging importance of both new communications technology and Southeast Asians to the modernization of the global Muslim community from Cheras in suburban Kuala Lumpur to [Cairo](#), Egypt to Chicago, Illinois.

### ***A Profound Change and Thank You Allah***

There is little in Maher Zain's initial career that would suggest that he would become a commercial success in Southeast Asia or be a leading synthesizer of his faith with modernity. Zain was born in [Lebanon](#) and raised in Sweden. While his father and siblings were musicians, he earned a college degree in aeronautical engineering and did not pursue a career in music in either Lebanon or Europe. Instead, he moved to the United States and collaborated with a Moroccan-born producer, who had also lived in Sweden, Nadir Khayat, or "RedOne." They worked with leading figures in the New York City music industry. Khayat eventually gained worldwide acclaim for his work with American mega pop star Lady Gaga.<sup>1</sup>

By that time, Zain had returned to Sweden and had experienced a personal crisis— a crisis akin to those faced by millions of Muslims in the modern world. It was resolved only after a visit to a Stockholm mosque, where he heard talks on youth and Islam and people performing *nasyid salawat*<sup>2</sup>— a genre of Islamic vocal composition. He suddenly became aware of what had been missing from his life, and the awareness caused a profound transformation in his consciousness. In November 2009, he released his debut album, *Thank You Allah*, which received an immediate boost when its second track, "Ya Nabi Salam Alayka," was voted the best religious song for 2009 in a song contest organized by a top Egyptian radio station. Zain's March 2010 concert at the American University in Cairo drew the elite of Egypt's music industry along with fans from the Arab world, Western Europe, and Asia. In May 2010 the album earned the top position in May 2010 on Amazon.com's digital charts in the world music category.<sup>3</sup>

But Zain's greatest commercial success was in [Malaysia](#) and in the Muslim world's most populous nation, Indonesia. Approximately 120,000 individual albums were sold in Malaysia, a country with only 27 million people. (Most singers in Malaysia usually sell a fraction of that number of albums.)<sup>4</sup> In 2010 *Thank You Allah* earned eight platinum awards from Warner Music Malaysia. That same year Zain was the most Googled personality in Malaysia. In 2011, the album earned a double platinum award from Sony Music Indonesia,<sup>5</sup> while tens of thousands attended his concerts in Malaysia in February and his October concerts in Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya.

### ***The Internet: The Biggest Blessing for Muslim Artists***

Again, Zain's success is all the more remarkable when we bear in mind that he spent no money on advertising and lacks a personalized webpage. Instead, his web presence is entirely in social media. His Facebook page includes photographs, links to his YouTube videos, and to other websites. (His videos have received more than 50 million hits and are available in multiple languages, including the language of Muslim Southeast Asia, Bahasa.) On the page's wall, Zain provides regular updates on his life, links to the work of other Muslim singers and Islamic scholars he follows, recommendations for Islamic education and opportunities to practice social activism, greetings to his fan clubs, and frequent polls to determine the opinion of his fans on a host of subjects related to his music and the contemporary world. Strikingly, Zain reminds his fans that he attends seminars and classes with leading experts in Islam: such classes and seminars are part of his struggle to remain true to his faith in the face of the many challenges of the modern world.

Such an approach is perfectly suited to an artist who has been pitching Islamic-themed music and seeking to gain a worldwide audience, especially in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia. In an interview with the British magazine *Emel* in 2011, Zain observed that the internet was the "biggest blessing" for Muslim artists, since they face obstacles in getting Islamic-themed music on mainstream radio and television stations in both the West and the Islamic world. By contrast, the internet allowed them to publicize their work directly to fans anywhere in the world regardless of political concerns.<sup>6</sup>

His timing could not have been better. Facebook usage grew exponentially between 2009 and 2011 in [Southeast Asia](#) and the other core markets for Zain. Thanks in part to the greater accessibility of the internet and smart phones, more people than ever logged on and joined Facebook.<sup>7</sup> In Malaysia 2009, there were 1.1 million Facebook users; in 2010 there were 5.5 million users; and by May 2011 there were 10.8 million users, or 40% of the nation's population. In Indonesia, the increases were equally startling: in 2009, there were 2.3 million Facebook users; in 2010, there were 20.7 million users; and 35.1 million users by May 2011. By 2011, Indonesia had the second highest number of Facebook users in the world. During the same time period, one saw increases in Facebook users in other countries where Zain also has large fan bases— Egypt (125%) and Turkey (110%). In 2010, Zain became the first Muslim artist to reach a million fans on Facebook; he has over three million today.<sup>8</sup>

### ***A Modern Muslim Cultural Identity via Music***

But Zain's success cannot be attributed solely to technology. It also reflects a new vision of Islam promoted by him and other singers on Awakening Records. This vision, in the words of Awakening Chief Executive Officer Sharif Banna, involves a "modern Muslim cultural identity via music" and other forms of popular entertainment, including comedy. (Awakening published the first ever Muslim-American comedy CD: Azhar Usman's *Square the Circle: American Muslim Comedy of Distortion*.) At the heart of both Awakening's music and comedy is the assertion that the answer to the systematic challenges facing Muslims in the contemporary world is *wasatiyya*, or moderation and balance in an individual's faith in Islam, God, and personal dignity.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, this conception of modern Islam reflects a synthesis of Western culture and Southeast Asian Islamic thought. Awakening Records is based in Great Britain and portrays itself as a Western Media company first and foremost. It has defended the right of Zain, Sami Yousef, and other Muslim Western singers to portray themselves as patriotic citizens of their nations and to offer a vision of their faith that is consistent with their homeland and that could play a part in solving the crisis confronting the West today. When making this argument, Awakening draws on Islamic history and its success at integrating into different cultures around the world. One sees this view in a letter published by Awakening in response to public criticism of Yousef for

promoting British national symbols at a concert in London:<sup>10</sup>

*In history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but having no color of their own reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow. In China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African. Sustained cultural relevance to distinct peoples, diverse places, and different times underlay Islam's long success as a global civilization.*<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, this new "Western" vision of Islam is consistent with the outlook of Muslims in another part of the world— Southeast Asia, especially the ideas of Azyumardi Azra, Bakar, Mohammad Kamal Hassan, Mohammad Hasim Kamali and others who emphasize the importance of *wasatiyya* or moderation in the modern world. Indeed, Banna has admitted that he is a great admirer of the religious ideas of one of Malaysia's and the world's leading synthesizers of Islam and modernity: Syed Naqib al-Attas.<sup>12</sup>

This vision of modern Muslim cultural identity— a synthesis of the West and Southeast Asian Islam— permeates *Thank You Allah*. Starting with the album's cover, we see Zain wearing clothes suited to a rhythm and blues concert in the West— blue jeans, a black jacket, and a dapper cap— but he is sitting in Islamic prayer. Equally importantly, the setting appears to be a boat or a house in Western Europe and not in a desert or other setting traditionally associated with Islam. He also consciously goes against traditional formulas for popular songs and music videos. Those productions revolve around a glamorized image of the singer above all else. But in Zain's case he appears to be an ordinary person— except for his musical talent, given to him by Allah, whom he regularly thanks.<sup>13</sup>

Thanking Allah is a central theme of the album in which he calls on Muslims not to blame all of their problems on the West but to realize their own role in their problems and in solving them. Zain also does not argue that Muslims have to either accept or reject Western modernity wholesale: instead, he implies they can accept aspects of modernity that they see as useful and reject those that are not consistent with their values. While many of his videos are set in the Middle East, he has videos set in the United States which feature American Muslims: the suggestion is that Muslims can be true to their faith and succeed in the West.

### ***Modern Islam in the West and the Middle East***

One can see this theme clearly in Zain's two videos set in the United States. The first, "The Chosen One" is set in Bakersfield, California and is similar to a *nasyid salawat*, a form of music common in Malaysia and a long staple of the country's popular music scene.<sup>14</sup> In the video, we see Zain singing about the [Prophet Muhammad](#) in English while walking in an American city filled with drug use, poverty, crime, and other social problems. In the first scene, Zain's neighbor dumps garbage on his front porch— an action meant to symbolize anti-Muslim bigotry in the West. Until the final scene, people other than Zain address the various social problems shown. In the final scene, Zain notices that his neighbor is sick and offers her soup. Zain is displaying his compassion and humanity here, but he is also invoking a story told about the Prophet Muhammad. For years a woman dumped garbage on his home until one day it stopped. The Prophet sought to see what had happened to the woman and offered to help her when he realized that she was sick.<sup>15</sup>

In the second video set in the United States, "Ya Nabi Salam Alayka," Zain sings a *nasyid salawat* in multiple languages (Arabic, English, Turkish, and Urdu). Throughout, Zain delivers handwritten notes marked in Arabic "sala ala al-Habib" (peace be upon the Prophet Muhammad) to Muslims of different races and ethnicities in Chicago, Illinois, the third-largest American city and home of

President Obama. Throughout the video, we see the diversity and the remarkable integration of Muslims into America: Asian Muslims playing a violin next to a Chinese temple, a black firefighter, a veiled florist, an unveiled female cook, and young men playing soccer. In the final scene, we even see Zain's note reaching a white, blue-eyed Muslim astronaut circling the earth above Chicago. Here it is worth noting that the inclusion of the firefighter and the astronaut is extremely significant. Astronauts have been American icons and symbols of selfless patriotism for decades, while firefighters attained similarly heroic status after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. By choosing a city that is one of the centers of the nation's politics and showing Muslims occupying such important professions, Zain is implying that Muslims are patriotic, productive citizens whose faith has something tangible to contribute to the foremost Western nation. In effect, if you can be pious and Muslim in the heart of modernity— middle America— you can be pious and modern *anywhere* in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Nor is Zain's vision of a modern Muslim cultural identity limited to the West. In the video "Palestine will be Free," he shows that such an identity and its principles are equally applicable to an apocalyptic urban landscape torn apart by Arab-Israeli violence. In the penultimate scene of the video, we see a young school girl holding a stone in front of an Israeli tank. The image is meant to invoke a clash between David and Goliath or might versus right. But it also has specific meaning for many Arabs: It is a reminder of the famous picture from the First Palestinian Intifada of a Palestinian child holding a rock above his head to throw at a nearby Israeli tank. But in Zain's video the girl drops the rock, stands defenseless in front of the Israeli tank, and implicitly puts her faith in Allah that her personal will is stronger than the mighty Israeli tank. Her faith is rewarded. As she moves forward, the tank withdraws.<sup>17</sup>

We also see that Zain's notion of modern cultural identity can be applied in still another setting in what remains Zain's most popular video, "Inshah Allah." (It has been viewed over 15 million times on YouTube.)<sup>18</sup> In the video, set in a dark landscape akin to modern graphic novels or the 1930s art of Lynd Ward, we see horrific images of people in trouble: rows of menacing riot police officers chasing a woman (played by American tennis star Serena Williams) holding a baby, a veiled woman in complete despair, a young man running from the world, a man addicted to drugs, and a man torturing a young and apparently Arab man atop a pile of books. But as Zain sings that one should never lose hope or despair because Allah is always is on your side, we see each of these individuals gaining hope and changing their behavior for the better. Strikingly, we even see the torturer removing his foot from the back of the young man to walk away.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Zain and the Arab Spring***

Within months of the release of *Thank You Allah*, revolts began throughout the Arab World. These revolts employed strategies similar to those used by Zain to promote both his music and his characters in his songs, and drew hope for a better future from Islam. Through enormous, peaceful demonstrations, protestors challenged Arab governments to withdraw in a manner recalling the way the little girl forced the withdrawal of the Israeli tank in the video "Palestine Will Be Free." They did not blame the West and utilized social media and YouTube to "market" their message (and circumvent mainstream and state media) in a manner reminiscent of Zain's (and Awakening Record's) approach to marketing music. The most important days of protesting corresponded with the most holy day of the week for Muslims— Friday— and included women and pious Muslim parties. The role of these two groups was sufficiently important that the Nobel Committee justified awarding the 2011 Peace Prize to a female Yemeni Islamic Activist, Tawakkal Karman. In an interview with the Associated Press in October, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Thorbjorn Jagland, noted that Karman's award was meant to signal that both women and Islam have played an important part in the 2011 Arab uprisings.<sup>20</sup>

These remarks are not meant to suggest that Maher Zain *caused* demonstrations or is an Islamic activist in the mold of Karman. But Zain's songs clearly reflect a wide-spread feeling of discontent and a desire for a different future among Islamic and secular activists in the Arab world. His awareness of that discontent and of the need for hope is an element of his popularity—epitomized by an Egyptian fan who stated at his Cairo concert in March 2010 that she loved the "revolutionary" feel of his music, which was neither materialistic nor in line with classical religious sermons.<sup>21</sup>

Zain tapped into this same feeling of discontent and the need for hope in the first song he released after the start of the Arab Spring, "Freedom." He premiered the song, which is entirely in English, in Malaysia in February 2011. The song thanks God for giving friends and neighbors the strength to hold hands and demand an end to oppression. It presents a vision for a new Arab Muslim society in which people will no longer be prisoners in their homes or afraid to voice their opinions in public. While Zain acknowledges that the dream of a new Arab society has yet to be fulfilled, he promises his listeners that they are on the verge of achieving it, that God is with them, and that he will not let them fail. In the background as Zain sings, there are images of Arab flags and protestors of all ages peacefully challenging their governments in the Arab World.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

More than eight months after the debut of "Freedom" in Malaysia, Zain continues to grow in popularity and his vision has struck a powerful chord among Muslims in Southeast Asia and beyond. He and his record label, Awakening Records, understand that Western music is a powerful vehicle to promote a modern Muslim cultural identity built around *wasatiyya* and to resolve a decades-old dilemma: how can Muslims remain true to their faith's principles and make a positive impact in a world still dominated by Western modernity? For Zain, the answer is deeply embedded in Western music and the approach of al-Attas and others to reconciling Islam and modernity. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that his music is immensely popular in a region of the world whose record at reconciling Islam and modernity has few peers in the world today: Southeast Asia. The hope embodied in his songs reflects a genuine change of consciousness in the Muslim world— and therefore in the world at large. As Maher Zain and Awakening Records know, songs stay in our heads, resonate, and lead us into realms of awareness that we could scarcely imagine before the music brought us there.

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<sup>2</sup>Eena Houzyama, "Thank God For Maher Zain," *Malay Mail*, October 11, 2011 (<http://www.mmail.com.my/content/51854-thank-god-maher-zain>).

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Foley, "Maher Zain's Hip But Pious Soundtrack to the Arab Spring."

<sup>6</sup>El-Katatney, "A Song and a Prayer," p.28.

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<sup>8</sup>Statistics based on information compiled from the following sources: IWS, "Asia Internet Usage," <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm> and "Facebook usage statistics 1st April 2011 vs. April 2010 vs/ April 2009," <http://www.nickburcher.com/2011/04/facebook-usage-statistics-1st-april.html>.

<sup>9</sup>Sharif Banna e-mail to Sean Foley, October 16, 2011.

<sup>10</sup>Yvonne Ridley, "Pop Culture in the Name of Islam" (<https://siraaj.wordpress.com/pop-culture-in-the-name-of-islam/>).

<sup>11</sup>For example, see Awakening Records, "Open letter from Sami Yusuf to Yvonne Ridley," ([http://www.samiyusuf.com/messages/Sami\\_Yusuf\\_open\\_letter.htm](http://www.samiyusuf.com/messages/Sami_Yusuf_open_letter.htm)).

<sup>12</sup>Sharif Banna e-mail to Sean Foley, August 4, 2011.

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<sup>14</sup>For more on the popularity of Nashid in Malaysia, see Margaret Sarkassian, "'Religion Never Had It So Good:' Nasyyid and the growth of Islamic Popular Music in Malaysia," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 37 (2005): 124-152.

<sup>15</sup>Foley, "Maher Zain's Hip But Pious Soundtrack to the Arab Spring."

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<sup>18</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfXIF2Mm2Kc>.

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<sup>21</sup>Donya Abdulhadi, "Fans Throng to Maher Zain's Debut Album Concert at AUC," *The Daily News* (Egypt), March 26, 2010 (<http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/archive/fans-throng-to-maher-zains-album-debut-concert-at-auc.html>).

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